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ABSTRACT

A study examined the status of women in composition (focusing on writing program administration), how they achieved this status and at what costs. Twenty women who are considered leaders in the field answered questionnaires dealing with training and background, administrative duties, and the effects on their personal and professional lives. Results indicated that although few of the female leaders had any administrative training, most have been administrators in the field of writing, and most have been active in state and national writing programs. To develop their programs they relied on consultation with professional colleagues, trial and error, past experience, and workshops and seminars. For the most part, administrative activities, which took an average of 21 hours per week, came on top of a full teaching load. Contrary to the stereotyped view of writing program administration as "middle management," intellectual projects seemed to be the main reason for taking on the position. Respondents' descriptions of the effects of writing program administration on personal life were widely divergent, based on marital status. All have published regularly. Practical advice for getting tenure offered by the respondents included getting a strong theoretical background, seeking out a mentor, and publishing as much as possible. In addition they suggested choosing new responsibilities carefully, determining priorities, and getting active in the profession. (PRA)

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Women in Composition: Where Are We Going and How Do We Get There?

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Women in Composition:
Where Are We Going and How Do We Get There?

In 1980, Janet Emig predicted that women would "not prosper as academics in this decade" (Kuhlman, 8).

In 1989, Elizabeth Flynn described composition as "a field that, from the beginning, has welcomed contributions from women--indeed, has been shaped by women" (424).

In 1990, Janet Emig noted that while there are now more women than men in comp/rhetoric, "there is a lack of status both for rhetoric and for women.... I don't think women are moving on" (Kuhlman, 9).

In 1991, Maxine Hairston said, "I don't agree that women have not prospered as academics. I think we've done quite well. Certainly women have done well in rhetoric and composition--Linda Flower, Lynn Bloom, Janet Emig, Winifred Horner, Andrea Lunsford, Erika Lindemann, Pat Bizzell, Theresa Enos, Janice Lauer, myself and several others.... I don't think we can complain at all about discrimination against women in rhetoric and composition."

What is the status of women in composition? Obviously, the women cited above have helped to shape the field, have achieved status, and have indeed prospered as academics. But how did they do it--and at what cost? As we move into the 1990s, we need to answer these questions. The answers are important, for they not only validate our role in shaping the profession; they also provide direction to the women beginning their own professional journeys.

To discover the answers, I asked the women who have achieved stature in the field. I chose them primarily because of their research and publication, but also because of their service to the profession. I included administrative service because I assumed that most women in composition had directed some element of their writing program, and that their service had affected the quality and quantity of their research. I wasn't wrong. Only one of my respondents had never served in an administrative capacity. And everyone who had directed a writing program had, indeed, been affected by it. Because the majority of the respondents had been writing program administrators, and because administration affected their careers, that is the focus of this presentation.

In December and January, I sent out a questionnaire to thirty women considered the leaders in the field of composition. There were ten clusters of

questions, ranging from training and background to administrative duties and the effects on their personal and professional lives. The questions are on the handout; the respondents' names are on the back. I'm sure you will recognize them. Although the questions comprised only one page, most responses averaged three single-spaced typed pages. I am grateful for the range and depth of their replies.

My original plan was to conflate the replies to provide you with a profile of the successful woman in composition. However, while these women bear a number of striking similarities and offer similar advice, they are not all cast from the same mold. As the introductory comments suggest, they also have their differences. Consequently, I have organized their responses according to the order of the questions on the handout. Within each area, I included varying opinions. The response rate was 66%--considered well above the average in such surveys. However, in round numbers that is only twenty. This number makes reporting responses by percentages a little silly, and statistically inappropriate. In this report, quality is much more important than quantity of respondents. Therefore, where there was general agreement, I used terms such as "half" or "most." At other times, I let the women speak for themselves.

Background and Training

The female leaders of the field have been academics for an average of 21 years. Their backgrounds vary: ten did their doctoral work in literature, though not always by choice. As Sue McLeod pointed out, there was "no such thing as a degree in rhetoric at that time [that she began]." The other respondents came from academic backgrounds more closely related to composition: six were in composition/rhetoric, two were in linguistics, and two were in English Education.

All but two of the respondents have been administrators, most of this in the field of writing, with some areas of writing program administration overlapping. Sixteen out of twenty directed writing programs; seven had been deans or department chairs; four directed graduate programs in research, rhetoric, or writing; five had coordinated a writing-across-the-curriculum program; and four had directed writing labs. In addition to departmental administration, most respondents have active in state and national writing programs.

Despite this range of experience, few had any administrative training and only five had mentors. Practically everyone said they "made it up as they went along." To develop their writing programs, the respondents relied on four main sources:

(1) Consultation with professional colleagues - within the department, across campus, at conferences, and at other writing programs.

(2) Trial and error - According to Louise Phelps, "observing the political situation..., talking with mentors who understood that situation, [and] working with older grad students as teacher and mentor helped me a lot to understand how to supervise people."

(3) Past experience - Theresa Enos felt that her "experience as a teacher of writing was the most valuable," although her career in business prior to entering academia may have contributed to her the "efficiency and dependability." This generation of women also benefitted from another useful source: at least half of the respondents were working mothers. They knew a great deal about how to manage time and balance responsibilities.

(4) Workshops and seminars - More than one respondent recommended the WPA Workshop and Conference. Others mentioned the Bryn Mawr Summer Seminar for Women in Higher Education Administration and the Summer Institute for Administrative Advancement at the University of Wisconsin.

Duties and Responsibilities

Combining teaching, writing, and research with administration is not easy. The most common duties included the following: develop curriculum, supervise and evaluate teaching assistants (TAs), plan and run the TA training program, direct graduate theses and dissertations, serve on any or all departmental and university writing committees, and deal with placement. Other duties included advising, scheduling classes, handling student complaints, writing academic reports, interviewing and hiring TAs and adjuncts. Not surprisingly, these duties took up a good deal of time--on an average, 21 hours a week. For the most part, these 21 hours came on top of a full teaching load, or a one-course reduction.

I do not emphasize these numbers to imply that female administrators are fools or martyrs. Far from it. Linda Flower's description of the method behind her administrative style is typical of the responses I received: "My goal was to make my administrative work as delegated and as streamlined as

possible--to put effort into testing ideas, developing new approaches in the course, not day to day keeping tabs or running things.... There are many ways to manage--micro management of a large enterprise makes no sense if you intend to have an intellectual project underway."

Contrary to the stereotyped view of writing program administration as "middle management," intellectual projects seemed to be the main reason for taking on this position. The most often cited word was "opportunity." The respondents relished the opportunity to shape and develop new programs, to apply theory and research to the training of graduate and undergraduate students, and to use their administrative experience as a basis for further empirical and theoretical research. In addition to opportunity, Louise Phelps said she took her present administrative position (at Syracuse) "to ground myself in prosaic realities, not merely in my own classroom but in a broader situation--curricular, institutional. Taking the job was in a sense a renewal of a social commitment and a determination that my theorizing would not be abstract and unconstrained, that I would put my money where my mouth was."

The average length of administrative service was ten years and counting--many are still WPAs. They have continued because they enjoy the contact with graduate students and the increased interaction the position brings with colleagues inside and outside the English department. Needless to say, administration isn't always enjoyable. The main irritants cited were demands on time, misperceptions or condescension by traditional colleagues, problems dealing with institutional bureaucracy, and a lack of institutional support. But these were not serious enough to make anyone resign. Those who are no longer WPAs quit because they wanted to teach more or felt the position should be shared.

The Effects of Administration

Writing program administration is a mixed blessing. It can take a toll on a woman's personal life, but it can also pay off professionally. The respondents' descriptions of the effects on personal life were widely divergent. Less than half the comments were negative, but they were explicit: "I had to work too hard and for too long"; "I was drastically overworked, chronically exhausted, and beset with feelings of guilt"; "I had no personal life to speak of"; "All the work that I do on my research I do on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday--and vacations, holidays, and summer breaks....I always have to be

ready to respond to emergencies, crises.... I always feel that part of what I do is devalued by my more traditional colleagues."

In contrast, the rest reported little or no problems, saying their work seldom (if ever) interfered with their personal life. The difference seems due to two factors: husbands and children. Those with no conflict were either married to an academic spouse or had grown children, or both. The most extreme responses came from those without these advantages.

This is not to say that women should hunt for an academic spouse, or plan their careers around children. Patricia Bizzell said "it used to be standard advice to postpone having children until after you get tenure. I'm not sorry I did it that way. But I have been much more productive since the children came (something mystical is going on there, I think).... If you ever want to have children, you are going to have to learn some time how to cope with the careerism of the academy. If you want to have children now, do it. Don't let the academy dictate everything."

When you look at the records of these women, you can see that they have learned to manage, and manage well. All of them have published regularly; almost half began during or immediately after their doctoral studies. While one person said she had been most productive since leaving administration, the others said they published as much if not more than their non-administrative peers, or had published more as a result of their WPA work. Three saw the interplay between teaching, research, and administration as "synergistic"--the total effect was greater than the sum of the effects taken independently. This is obvious when you look at their publication record. Not everyone sent me a vita, but even this partial list, from twenty respondents, demonstrates what can be accomplished.

- 24 chapters
- 75 books
- 254 articles
- 258 reviews

With records like this, tenure would seem automatic. Nevertheless, we have all heard horror stories about women in composition who were denied tenure. The reason is almost always political. And indeed, this was the case with three of the respondents. But the rest had few problems. Another worry surrounding tenure is whether administrative work will impede it. In the case of these women, it did not. Five received tenure before taking on

ad ninistrative duties, and two after; the rest were tenured during their administrative reign.

How Do We Get There?

Despite these happy endings, we know that tenure does not come automatically. But the process may be easier if we follow the advice of those who have earned it.

Expect to be involved in writing program administration. As Marilyn Sternglass says, "it is likely that the administrative responsibilities in this field are much greater than for women in other academic specializations." Louise Phelps agrees: "I think most people in our field end up doing administration at some point, because of the centrality of writing programs to our institutional presence." With this in mind, it makes sense to be prepared. Janice Lauer recommends getting a strong theoretical background. Lillian Bridwell-Bowles agrees: have "a solid specialization in composition studies, with lots of theory and research courses from a number of different paradigms. This is an interdisciplinary field and we should read widely." Build upon your theoretical background. Get practical experience. Tutor. Work in the Writing Lab. Seek out mentors and learn from them.

When I was in graduate school, Marilyn Sternglass was in charge of the Basic Skills Writing Program. Knowing my interest in writing program administration, she had me assist her prior to her sabbatical. I went with her to university meetings, wrote reports, observed classes, and ran committee meetings. When she went on leave, I took over as the interim Director. Louise Phelps believes that this type of mentoring is essential. "Graduate programs need to help people, especially women, define and esteem their own strengths, plan their careers in relation to these strengths and with clear-headed acknowledgment of their limitations, and pursue longterm intellectual projects. They need to study the politics and institutionalization of the field and learn strategies for not simply coping, but operating powerfully within these contexts, not being afraid of authority and responsibility. I advise women to take up responsibilities, but on their own terms. They should seek the experience that fits their ambitions and their personal life situations.

Don't be afraid to take on new responsibilities. Louise Smith said "I've felt misgivings about <u>every</u> new position I've ever taken, yet when I actually got going on each one, it wasn't so mysterious or impossible, and people were

remarkably generous with their time and advice." But choose your responsibilities carefully. Determine your priorities. You need to do what you enjoy. You must also learn to say no.

If you want to be an administrator, get a mentor, go to 4Cs, join the WPA, and get active in the profession. But carefully time the move into administration. All but two respondents advised putting it off until after tenure. However, that's not always possible. In fact, Lisa Ede points out that "applying only for non-administrative jobs may considerably reduce the possibility of getting a job." Barbara Cambridge advises untenured WPAs "to have a mutually-agreed-upon plan with their department, to have clear research activities within their administrative work, and to become active regionally and nationally in administrative organizations to be able to achieve the national connections and/or reputation so essential at many places for tenure and promotion."

Whenever you become a WPA, heed the following advice:

- "Learn to negotiate with your chair and your dean, not only for yourself (teaching loads, what "counts" toward tenure and promotion, summer appointments) but also for your program (training periods for TAs, compliance with the CCCC Principles and Standards document on the hiring of part-timers).... Get such promises in writing--deans leave, chairs retire, and unless you have the letter to prove that you get credit for certain things, you won't get it" (Susan McLeod).

- "Work very hard to get a sense of how this position is viewed in the department, what its history is, how the chair supports it, [and] what challenges the program faces in the next few years" (Lisa Ede).

- "Choose your battles carefully. Fight honestly the ones you must; know that you won't win them all. [During the process], learn to disagree without being disagreeable. Don't whine" (Erika Lindemann).

- "Allow for growth. Re-negotiate your course load annually. But don't lose touch with the students. WPAs ought to teach freshman composition and a required course for TAs once a year" (Suzanne Webb).

- Take care of yourself. "Learn to control the time [you] spend on campus.... I keep a calendar open on my desk for appointments and meetings, but I schedule them only for limited hours, three days a week. I block out other times for meetings, classes, and writing." Schedule time to work out, and

do it. Control how much you work at home so you have time to spend with your family--"work as little as possible on the weekends" (Lillian Bridwell-Bowles).

- Set a time limit to the position, so that the department will "continue hiring and training new people to take over these responsibilities" (Marilyn Sternglass).

- See "what sort of intellectual work you want to get done in that capacity" (Linda Flower).

- "Publish, publish, publish--that's it in a nutshell. A good publication record gives you clout to leave or get out. Always know your way out of any position that you're in. That keeps your options open. And the way out or staying in and being valued is to have publications" (Win Horner).

Erika Lindemann notes that "writing [has] always been necessary, especially for people presuming to teach writing to others." This feeling was underscored by many of the respondents. Louise Phelps writes, "My administration and teaching suffer (things are done more slowly, sometimes less competently) because of the time I insist on spending on my research and writing; but then that work benefits my administration and teaching in myriad ways--indeed, it provides the specific values that I bring to administrative tasks. I often wish I had more time to spend on research and writing, but the administrative work that I have chosen, and the way I do it, contribute enormously to my research by setting interesting problems and putting me in constant contact with teachers and a teaching community."

No matter how busy you may be, do not postpone writing. Patricia Bizzell advises, "if writing is important to you, if you love to do it, as I do, don't make the mistake of classifying it with your other pleasures as postpone-able indefinitely while everyone else's needs are met ('tonight after I read to the kids and do the laundry and grade that set of papers, then I'll write'). Make a time for it that is as regular a part of your schedule as meeting a class."

"Start early to publish," says Maxine Hairston, "but publish what you believe in and work at doing quality work." Should publications include textbooks? When publishers dangle large advances in front of you, writing a textbook may seem like easy money. But it isn't. Hairston makes that clear: "it's a great deal of work and requires confidence and courage.... Anyone who publishes a textbook sets herself up as an authority and automatically invites sniping--it's not an easy position."

Despite these words of warning, the majority of respondents agreed that textbooks are valuable if theory is applied to pedagogy. Maxine Hairston points out that "the process makes one really examine one's philosophy of and practices in teaching and work hard to communicate those beliefs to others. I also believe I have substantially influenced teaching by my textbooks and have been able to introduce current research and practices to many hard working teachers who have never had the opportunity to become trained in teaching writing. There's also a great deal of profesional reinforcement from writing a good textbook. Don't underestimate the pleasure of having people you've never heard of come up to you at a convention or write a letter to telling you how much your textbook has meant to them. And, as I have said, the income increases one's freedom immeasurably."

But will it get you tenure? It can help. Approximately one quarter of the respondents reported that their textbooks were "surprisingly well-regarded."

Women in Composition - Looking Towards the Future

Some of this advice may not appear to be gender-specific. Anyone could profit from it. But it is appropriate, I think, to direct it towards women. These are not the things we learned at our mother's knees. This is the type of advice one receives through networking, through the type of "team" involvement that women have only recently begun. It is no secret that we live in a patriarichal society, so we need to know the rules of the game.

Susan McLeod underscores the necessity of understanding our political status: "Never underestimate the sexism that is still under the surface of academic life. We would all like to think that the battle is won, but in fact it is not, and certainly not in as hierarchical a place as academe. There are many men who are still threatened by a woman who is perceived as doing a better job than they are. Such sexism is, I think, a good reason for women to get into administration--for people like us to move up from writing program administration to line positions in the institutions--to try to change the system from within, making the climate a less chilly one for women of the next generation."

"Despite these conditions," says Louise Phelps, "our academic institutions already have lots of space for women to claim their own education, their own careers, and their own lives, much more opportunity to do so than

most people think." We should approach these problems "not from the passive perspective of resisting exploitation (e.g., simply not doing administration) but from the active perspective of seeking, creating, and seizing opportunities for constructive activity; resisting domination by deliberately creating alliances and options for oneself; being willing to accept authority and responsibility."

Maxine Hairston takes this advice a step further: "Don't assume that you're discriminated against--just do good work and have confidence that you'll come out all right. Work toward a national reputation rather than at being "in" in your department. In the long run, national standing will benefit you more than following the party line in your institution or in the profession. Party lines shift too frequently to be a reliable guide for your career. Ultimately, the only work that will be rewarding is that you believe in."

Finally, do not forget who you are or how far you have come. As Suzanne Webb put it, "realize that two or three generations of women have broken the ground for you. Don't drop the torch."

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